NIE's on Indochina, performance —

5 June 1954

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

SUBJECT: National Estimates on Trends in Indochina.

1. On 3 June 1954 there appeared in the New York Times an article by Hanson Baldwin which among other things said:

> Recently our intelligence estimates of
> Indochina have erred badly; we expected
> Dienbienphu to hold out longer than it did,
> and the redeployment of the Vietminh Armies
> into the Red River delta area has occurred
> much faster than expected.

2. The national intelligence record on the two specific points made by Mr. Baldwin follows:

a. How long Dienbienphu would hold:

This question was not dealt with in any NIE. However an assumption that DBP would hold out longer than it did underlay an estimate of when VM forces committed at DBP would be available for major operations elsewhere. Thus in NIE 63-54,* para. 2, we concluded that "The fall of DBP would not in itself substantially alter the relative military capabilities of French Union and Viet Minh forces in Indochina during the next two or three months" /i.e., until late June or late July/.

b. How fast VM forces would be redeployed to the Delta:

This question was dealt with in two NIE's.

NIE 63-54, para. 11, stated that "prior to the rainy season" the redeployment of VM forces from DBP to the Delta "would require at least three to four weeks" after the fall of DBP. This has proven to be accurate.

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* NIE 63-54, "Consequences within Indochina of the Fall of Dien Bien Phu", had as its basic assumption the fall of DBP and was dated 28 April. DBP actually fell on 7 May.

Para. 11 also stated that "After the full onset of the rainy season, which is unlikely before mid-May, the movement would take between two and three months to complete."

However, para. 7 of the Conclusions rested in part on the built-in estimate (or implicit assumption) that the fall of DBP was not imminent and hence that DBP would not fall until after the onset of the rainy season.

We therefore concluded "That the bulk of the Viet Minh forces released by the fall of Dien Bien Phu would probably not be able to move, regroup, and re-equip in time to be employed in new major operations during the next two or three months, although some lightly equipped infantry battalions might be made available more rapidly for operations in the Delta region."

These errors in military judgment -- underestimating VM capabilities and overestimating French initiative -- were corrected in NIE 63-1-54* produced after the actual fall of DBP. Therein we stated that "The major portion of the forces at Dien Bien Phu with their heavy equipment could not assemble in the Delta area before 7-15 June, although . . . lightly equipped units could complete the movement by 31 May."

3. Attached are verbatim excerpts from NIE's and ONE memoranda produced since early 1952. (Tab "I" and Tab "II") These excerpts bear directly on Mr. Baldwin's general statement that "Recently our intelligence estimates of Indochina have erred badly. . . ."

4. On looking over NIE production since early 1952 we conclude that the intelligence community has fully and repeatedly analyzed the major trends. The projections of these trends have been borne out by events to a remarkable degree. On the other hand, certain analyses of tactical trends have not stood up as well and in some cases have been contradicted by events.

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*"Probable Military and Political Developments in Indochina over the Next 30 Days", dated 20 May.

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5. In short, on certain narrow military questions, where the community had to rely principally on the judgment of a single agency (in turn primarily dependent on French sources), we have at times been wrong. However, on broad political and military questions, where the judgment of the entire community could be brought to bear, the estimates have been sound, and the policy maker put on notice well in advance of events.

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Acting Assistant Director
National Estimates

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